

The Building of the old County Hall and Courts

The County Council has recently abandoned Aylesbury Courthouse for use as a Council Chamber because it is not DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant. It seems appropriate at this time, when it has been announced that a new court will be built in Aylesbury and therefore the existing facility will become redundant, to reflect on how this building came to be, and its use over time.

At the beginning of the 18th century and for a century and a half after, there were no County or District Councils and the whole of the County's business was conducted by the Magistrates in Quarter Sessions, often in a hotel. There was only one directly paid employee: the Clerk of the Peace.

The original scheme for a building at the bottom of the Market Square, drawn up in 1720, was to replace an existing, inadequate gaol which was a converted house that stood on the same site. The house, owned by William Benson, was considered neither strong, convenient nor large enough to hold prisoners in safe custody. It was two years into the build that the decision was made to include courts.

At a meeting of Magistrates held on the 8th of June 1720 at the George Inn, Aylesbury (The George Inn once stood in the Market Square next to what is now Lloyds Bank) the gentlemen deliberated the future of the gaol. Their considerations included what sum of money should be raised for carrying out the work; what workmen were to be employed; and whether or not to buy the land on which the gaol was situated, or indeed to search for another site. It was decided to approach the owner of the existing gaol, Mr Benson.

Mr Benson initially wanted £1,000 but eventually settled for £600. At the end of the year a selection of "plans, ground plots and models" were brought before the Magistrates for inspection. It was decided that one of their number, Bernard Turney, should take the various sets of plans to Sir John Vanbrugh (who was then the Controller of the Board of Works and Surveyor of Greenwich Hospital), for appraisal. Sir John Vanbrugh worked with Nicholas Hawksmoor on a number of projects including the design of Blenheim Palace. Sir John selected a scheme by a Mr Harris and Co.

The next task was to raise money to build the new gaol. In 1721 an order was made to raise a county rate of 1d in



Sketch by Nick Carter, courtesy of The Aylesbury Society

the £ which produced £983 16s 4d. A year later a report was issued detailing the amounts and costs of best oak timber (£3 per load), bricks (18s per 1,000) and lime (18s per load). At this session it was agreed to raise a further rate of 2d in the £ which realised £1,967 9s 11d. It was also mooted that a courtroom be included in the building and at the 1722 Midsummer Session the original plans were altered. In the following year it is clear that all money had been spent and another order was made to raise £1,967 9s 11d by another 2d in the £ tax. However there appeared to be some problems with raising this money as it was reported that a number of Bucks residents had defaulted. By 1724 all money raised had been spent and a further £2,000 was owed. Work on the building was stopped.

At the Midsummer Session of 1726 it was decided to obtain an Act of Parliament to legitimise further requests for money from Bucks residents. It took 5 years for this act to become law. The workmen were still owed nearly £2,000 (they were not paid until 1737 by which time a number of the creditors had died) and it was estimated that a further £2,000 would be required to finish the building. As a result the Magistrates at the Midsummer Sessions of 1737 ordered that £3,916 11s 6d be raised by rate.



The courthouse was not completed until 1740 at an overall cost of approximately £8,000. It had taken 20 years from start to finish and for 13 of these years no work was carried out.

Originally the front of the building had three entrances. The one at the eastern end served as an entrance to the passage of the gaol. The central doorway led to the Clerk of the Peace's office and the Magistrates' chamber. The western door and the central door were massive. The western door was obviously built to withstand attack from riotous mobs, as the inside was armour plated and was once fitted with loop-holes so that muskets could be fired through them.

Under the central window, overlooking the Market Square, was once a first floor balcony which for many years was used for public hangings. Here criminals were executed in the presence of large crowds, who would travel from far and wide to witness the spectacle. The last public hanging at this location took place when John Tawell, a notorious murderer, was executed on the 28th March 1845. It was no accident that the nearby pub (once called 'The Green Man' and now 'The Square') was built with a large first floor verandah. Seats there, giving the best possible view of the poor wretch dangling and twitching at the end of the Hangman's rope, were at a premium. Also much in demand was the upstairs parlour of the King's Head, from which a very good vantage point was to be had.

This was not the only punishment exacted at the prison. Regularly prisoners were taken from the prison, tied to the back of a cart and marched up to the George Inn and back, during which time they were whipped constantly until well "bloodied". During the Swing Riots of the 1800s prisoners were locked up here prior to being transferred to the hulks for transportation to Tasmania.

A substantial proportion of the 200 prisoners locked up at any one time were debtors. Debtors were locked up until they paid back the money they owed. In front of the eastern end of the building was an area known as Debtors Fee, where these unfortunates were allowed to exercise.

The prison cells were immediately under the inner court and included no less than 5 condemned cells. The place was more of a dungeon than a prison and was condemned as unfit for use as early as the 19th century.

The gaol was bounded on the eastern side by the White Hart Inn, a substantial establishment which had been rebuilt in the early 1800s, replacing a 16th century building. The gardens covered 5 acres and stretched down to the banks of the Bearbrook. This was demolished in 1864 and the current "Arches" building was erected as a Corn Exchange by the Aylesbury Market Company. This enterprise failed and the premises were then used by Aylesbury Borough Council. One of the early prison reforms was to ban spirits or liquor being sold to inmates via the prison gates. To circumvent this a window of the White Hart was used to pass liquor into the prison yard, therefore evading the Act of Parliament.

One problem facing prison officials in those days was that whilst sentences often carried the rider "... with hard labour", there was little hard labour for the prisoners to do. Therefore, to provide hard labour, a 20 foot diameter treadmill was installed. This was operated by two gangs who worked alternate shifts of twenty minutes and on twenty minutes off. The wheel helped to grind corn and pump water, but its construction proved to be dangerous and several fatal accidents occurred. The wheel was condemned by the Inspector of Prisons in 1841.

Prisoners who behaved themselves well enough could have special privileges and were allowed to leave prison to work elsewhere in the Town. Use of this arrangement benefited Acton Chaplin, who was the Clerk of the Peace at the beginning of the 19th century. He lived in the Old House, which has now been demolished but formerly occupied the land on which today stands the Blue Leanie, headquarters of HBOS. The lake that fronts onto Friarage Road was once a feature of the Old House's gardens and among other earthworks was excavated by convict labour.



All sketches by Nick Carter, courtesy of The Aylesbury Society

On the demolition of the gaol in 1847, part of the site was used to erect the Judges Lodgings, still extant and much loved.

So, as this building, after 250 years of use as a house of correction and legal confrontation, faces an uncertain future, what next? The building is listed, so there are limitations as to what it can be used for. It is in a parlous state of repair and it will require a brave company to take on its conversion for other use. One thing is for certain: as the building that dominates the Market Square; it is an Aylesbury landmark; it is part of our shrinking heritage, it is very precious to us and it deserves a future.

Keith Turner
Development Officer

